

Town of Arlington



Town Meeting Procedures Committee Report to 2024 Annual Town Meeting

Greg Christiana, Chair Ex-Officio
John L. Worden III
Adam Auster
Christopher Moore
Rebecca Gruber

Introduction

This year two different Citizens' Petitions (Warrant Articles 8 and 9) seek to change the start time of the first night of the Annual Town Meeting, as defined in our Town Bylaws, to 7:30 PM (the scope of Article 8 permits additional changes). Such changes, if approved by Town Meeting, would not take effect until next year.

This report provides recommendations to the Select Board and the Town Moderator to help Town Meeting navigate choices related to these two articles and meeting time.

The Committee considers these issues in the context of its charge from the Town Bylaws, in particular Title I Article 1 Section 8. Procedures Committee:

D. Duties. *The committee shall consider, recommend, and report to the Town Meeting on matters related to Town Meeting procedures. The committee shall take a broad view of matters related to Town Meeting procedures. In addition to considering how such matters affect the Town Meeting, the committee shall also consider how these matters affect the desire of voters of the Town to become Town Meeting Members.*

Recommendations

In order to help Town Meeting gain experience with changes in meeting time, the Town Meeting Procedures Committee recommends that:

1. the Moderator entertain motions to table or postpone Articles 8 and 9 in order to give Town Meeting an opportunity to gain real-world experience with an earlier end time on a trial basis before weighing related changes to the Town Bylaws.

2. the Moderator entertain motions to adjourn around 10:30 PM each evening. As usual, Town Meeting will vote on whether to affirm the motion to adjourn; if that vote fails, the meeting will continue with regular business until there is an affirmative vote to adjourn.
3. the Moderator strictly enforce a ten-minute break at around the halfway point each evening to tighten the proceedings and make more effective use of the meeting's time in anticipation of earlier end times.

In regard to the recommended votes under Articles 8 and 9, the Town Meeting Procedures Committee further recommends that:

4. the Select Board move "no action" under Article 8, possibly from the floor of Town Meeting.
5. the Select Board provide a main motion under Article 9 implementing a start time of 7:30 PM. However, the Town Meeting Procedures Committee takes no position on whether the start time should be changed to 7:30 PM. Given that there are essentially two viable options under Article 9, leaving the start time at 8 PM or changing it to 7:30 PM, the Committee recommends that the Select Board make this motion in order to limit the procedural complexity of deliberation by offering an up-or-down vote on changing the start time to 7:30 PM. (See *Town Meeting Time*, 3rd edition, §40: "reconsideration by thin slices.")

Commentary

The Town Meeting Procedures Committee, having considered input from the Finance Committee Chair, the Redevelopment Board Chair, the proponents of Articles 8 and 9, and responses to relevant questions from last year's Town Meeting Survey, draws the following conclusions:

1. There are three distinct issues worth separating:
 - a. meeting start time
 - b. meeting end time
 - c. where the authority resides for the determination of start time and end time
2. At present, only the start time of the first night of Town Meeting is set in the Town Bylaws. The start time of all subsequent nights of Town Meeting, as well as the end time, is tradition implemented through motions presented to and voted on by the meeting.
3. The scope of Article 8 would permit Town Meeting to consider two other Bylaw changes, which the Procedures Committee considers inadvisable. One would give to the Select Board the authority to alter the start date of the Annual Town Meeting (which is already covered separately under Article 10), and the other would write into the Bylaws a 10:30 PM adjournment time for Town Meeting.
4. Placing a strict limit on the end time of Town Meeting, which is permitted within the scope of Article 8, is procedurally problematic. For instance, Town Meeting may fail to reach an affirmative vote on adjournment by the required end time; in such a case, votes taken after that time risk being nullified, leaving the meeting in an ambiguous state. A strict end time would also deprive the Meeting of the discretion to continue the meeting past the end time (even for a few minutes) in order to complete a vote or reach a natural stopping point. Also, Section 10.E of the Town Bylaws (Article 1) requires that any member wishing to reconsider a vote at a subsequent session give "notice of their intention to make such motion at the session of the meeting at which the vote was passed." Under current practice, the Moderator expressly allows members to

do so before adjournment. An “automatic” adjournment would complicate this process and could lead to situations in which members wishing to move reconsideration are deprived of their right to do so. Therefore, the Committee believes it’s best that each session of Town Meeting should set its own adjournment time.

5. The proponents of Articles 8 and 9 are most concerned about the late hour of the traditional 11 PM end time and less concerned about where the authority resides for establishing those times, e.g. at the Moderator's discretion vs the Town Bylaws.
6. Boards and committees that do work that is both concurrent with and relevant to Town Meeting – in particular the Finance Committee and the Redevelopment Board – are particularly sensitive to Town Meeting's start time; in particular, earlier start times for Town Meeting may negatively impact the ability of those bodies to achieve quorum, and attract diverse membership that lacks the privilege of flexible schedules, e.g. travel time from workplaces given the variability of commute times.
7. Changing the start time for this year’s meeting could have an invasive impact on many participants' schedules, whereas ending before 11 PM would only impact participants potentially in terms of the number of evenings that Town Meeting convenes (i.e. shorter meetings may result in more meeting nights). Therefore, pursuing an earlier end time on a trial basis can be done any or all evenings, whereas earlier start times should be considered on a more limited basis and only when sufficiently advance notice can be given to participants, staff, volunteers, and vendors.